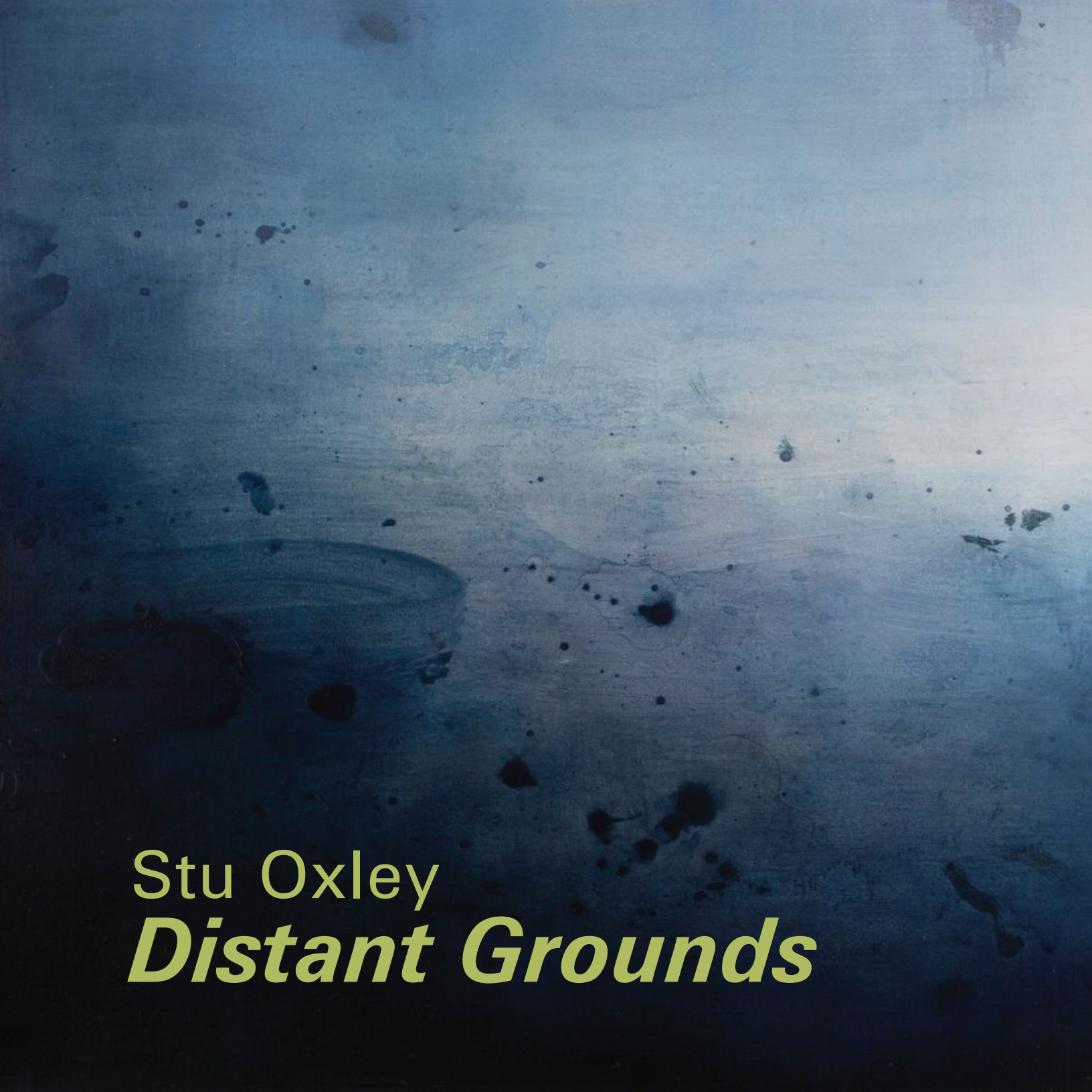
Stu Oxley
Distant Grounds

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Distant Grounds

Essays by John Kissick and Ron Shuebrook
Interview with the artist by curator Emily McKibbon

MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario, July 9 – October 25, 2015
Art Gallery of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, January 21 – March 27, 2016
Woodstock Art Gallery, Woodstock, Ontario, October 14, 2017 – January 27, 2018

Foreword

Entering the exhibition space that houses Stu Oxley's *Distant Grounds*, we are enveloped in the immersive visual field of his newly conceived abstract paintings. Square canvases, their format unhinges ready associations with either landscape or figure; however, expansive washes of luminous colour lend an atmospheric quality to these works, coupled with gestural articulations that register as simultaneously deliberate and random, studied yet improvisational. Through our engagement with these provocative works, Oxley invites us into a space of beauty, of depth, of quiet contemplation—a realm beyond the contingent, resonant with possibilities.

We draw inspiration for our exhibitions from the accomplishments of artists working in our regions and by the experiences that inf uence their lives. Stu Oxley is widely known as a master printer. Based in Elora, Ontario, he teaches drawing and printmaking at Georgian College in Barrie. Two simultaneous exhibitions pay tribute to Oxley's accomplishments. His solo exhibition, *Distant Grounds*, features recent large-scale paintings by the artist while *Artists at Riverside Studio* highlights his print collaborations with nineteen artists between 1980 and 2015 at his print-making facility, Riverside Studio in Elora.

We are indebted to Stu for the opportunity to showcase these exquisite artworks, and for his curatorial hand in bringing together *Artists at Riverside Studio*; for the very eloquent essays by Ron Shuebrook and John Kissick; MacLaren Associate Curator Emily McKibbon for her deft organization of these exhibitions, the subsequent tour and this publication; the exhibition lenders who have supported this project; Stewart Esten for their multi-year support of the MacLaren's exhibition programme; Paul Kuhn Gallery for their generous publication support; and our dedicated professional staff.

We also extend our sincere gratitude to the City of Barrie, the University of Guelph, the City of Guelph, the City of Woodstock, the Ontario Arts Council through the Government of Ontario and the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as our Patrons, Friends, Partners and Sponsors for their generous support, which makes our exhibitions possible.

CAROLYN BELL FARRELL
Executive Director, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie

DAWN OWEN
Acting Director/Curator, Art Gallery of Guelph

MARY REID
Director/Curator, Woodstock Art Gallery

"…pure space rushing from realms unknown…"
—Rainer Maria Rilke[1]

"Conception" cannot precede "execution".
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty[2]

"…And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,
The spirit and space."
—Wallace Stevens[3]

Discerning Form, Conjuring Meaning:

The Evocative Abstractions of Stu Oxley

by RON SHUEBROOK

With their luminous colour, allusive spaces and inscrutable processes of execution, Stu Oxley's awe-inspiring paintings possess a sense of the miraculous and the ineffable. With a sustained faith in his own perceptions, the fresh precisions of his intuited actions and his finely honed visual judgments, Oxley employs the traditional materials of acrylic paint on unprimed canvas and an improvised order in the discovery of propositions and relationships that evoke a spiritual and aesthetic transcendence. Whether working on intimate canvases, or on a grand scale, he begins each composition without conscious goals but with a desire to achieve an original visual presence. Never really knowing when he will arrive at a satisfying state, he is resolved to act in the moment, accepting, yet discerning, in the risky evolution of each painting. His hard-earned vocabulary has been developed from an inner need to explore the physical and metaphoric possibilities of his selected media. He bravely proceeds to integrate transparent layers of nuanced hues and tones, directional lines and spontaneous gestures and decisive areas of focus into haunting, complicated pictorial experiences. Oxley clearly possesses refined gifts

for formal and technical invention and is able, consequently, to establish compelling, simultaneous tensions between states of movement and stillness, depiction and abstraction and emergence and recession. He seems open to almost limitless possibilities, while creating a searching, sublime art of aesthetic wholeness in which nothing arbitrary survives.

While clearly guided by his individual motivations, Oxley, nevertheless, is well aware of his affinities with such historic and contemporary precedents as J.M.W. Turner's glowing watercolors, Helen Frankenthaler's exquisite colour fields, Chinese and Japanese landscape traditions, Cy Twombly's emotive scrawls and mythic inferences and Otto Rogers' elegantly resonant abstractions. Although Oxley is very much an artist of our time, he also acknowledges these continuities and constellations of inf uence and inspiration. Moreover, he has also spoken gratefully about the valuable encouragement and support for his work that he has received from fellow artists such as Tony Scherman, Margaret Priest, Stephen Hutchings, Neil Shawcross and others, as well as from the Paul Kuhn Gallery and the Mira Godard Gallery. With a disarming humility, yet authentic ambition, Stu Oxley has dedicated his talents to creating a highly personal art of integrity that has also been nurtured by relevant cultural traditions and contemporary catalysts.

All of Oxley's immensely beautiful paintings seem to be in elusive states of *becoming*, invite countless interpretations and are freshly crafted, contingent objects of contemplation. Nevertheless, these enigmatic, untitled works resist a simple naming that might limit the viewer's expectations and experiences to a specific meaning or narrative. No linguistic equivalent seems sufficient to convey the complex contents that are embodied in these decidedly open works; instead they insist on the viewer's careful engagements to reveal even the most tentative of meanings. However, to probe

effectively into the essential nature and specificity of these works, it is necessary to begin with a brief description of the physical and perceptual properties of each work as well as of the various strategies and actions by which they have been achieved. Upon initial encounter, each painting seems to be comprised of an obvious, predominant hue. However, that impression soon gives way to a greater understanding that Oxley has, in fact, achieved a much more subtle orchestration of implied light, contrasting tones and saturated colours, as well as an effective integration of varied incidents of buried line and discrete gestures.

The smallest painting in this series measures only eighteen inches by twenty-four inches; it nevertheless conveys a dramatic grandeur reminiscent of the changing moods and forces that may be associated with environmental subjects, or actually experienced in observations of the sea and coastal landforms. In this impressive work, the attentive viewer's gaze travels from its deeply shadowed foreground through a brooding layered space of transitional grays to an advancing turquoise. Towards the upper centre of the horizontal expanse, contrasting white gestures rise diagonally from the shifting surface and seem caught in mid-moment, while—toward the right edge—two small, irregularly rounded, black shapes of different sizes echo each other, affirm the fact of the picture plane, and flank a more distant, ghostly mound. This poignantly structured composition of powerful, though restrained, energies offers engaging experiences of referential and formal complexity.

A slightly larger, three by three foot, almost monochrome canvas employs a similar moody blue-black to give optical weight, and an uneasy stability, to the lower portion of the field. This intensely recessional colour establishes a visual and psychological opposition to the pale blue-white that enlivens and illuminates the upper right section

of the painting. In addition, dark strokes, gestures and drips punctuate the rectangle, and urge the viewer's attention to travel from incident to incident across the surface and into the ambiguous space. With the movement implied by the changing colour and painterly strategies (that range from the near white of the woven canvas to the translucent and transparent washes, marks and veils of rich emotive blues), Oxley models the indeterminate space and gives a psychological unity to the nearly nocturnal character of this memorable painting.

His inclination to invoke landscape subjects is explicit in a four by four foot canvas of glowing, golden ochres and harmonic greens. In this moving work, a hazy, horizontal mass hovers in space and invites recollections of an island, dark and looming, in an edgeless fog, where oppositions of warm and cool air meet and aspects of representation and abstraction merge. A linear sequence of phantom marks trails upward and downward from this larger shape and tentatively suggests ambiguous entities, submerged or f oating. Along the upper right corner of the modulated rectangle, a slightly less dark recessional area gives a subtle interlocking contrast to the f uid translucent atmosphere. The pervasive mood of this referential work is that of a f eeting encounter with forces and tensions interacting through the causalities of expressive form. By the patient articulation of shifting, f owing planes that advance and recede, and because of the relationships of colour, shape, line and proportion, Oxley has created a subtly dynamic site of movement and stasis, in which he has transformed the otherwise familiar into attractive experiences of wonder and quiet contemplation.

In a five by five foot, mostly orange-red canvas, a contrasting gray-white zone becomes, with careful scrutiny, a recessional space that presses insistently against the advancing ground. At certain significant points, along the upper left and lower left edges, white

marks and darker receding stains draw attention to the picture plane, while lines and shapes serve as counterpoints to the limits of the glowing field.

In a much larger seven by seven foot pale green and gray canvas, the viewer is again invited to engage with an evocation of an unknown, atmospheric landscape in which a dark horizontally sequential form anchors the viewer's attention along the bottom right edge of the support, and affirms the physical surface. The angular repetitions in this confidently brushed mass suggest a movement toward the right which vies for the viewer's attention in relation to the directional inferences of gravity-defying drips, blurred volumes, ethereal light and space, emancipated lines and small, deftly placed white spots. With a telling array of competing visual notations, Oxley has conjured an unexpected order where chaos might have reigned, while deftly constructing a distinct, visual poetry from random incidents, decisive arrangements and tensions and a rare facility for improvisation.

In these extraordinary personal paintings, Stu Oxley has courageously entered into a stream of unpredictable discovery, without strict conceptual boundaries. He has sought to reveal unverifiable truths of the "timeless" and infinite, rather than the appearance of the transient "new". From this sincerely felt position, he has created necessary declarations of aesthetic integrity that are much more than the sum of their parts and invite only provisional interpretations. Neither secure nor absolute in meaning, these works defy stylistic definition and challenge the temporary reassurances of the causal and the rational. Nevertheless, these uncanny works, though intellectually puzzling, are emotionally compelling in their various states of contingency, suggesting latent possibilities. Without the armature of fashionable theory, Oxley has transformed the tentative and deliberate, the spontaneous and the planned, the absent and the present,

into an immensely open experience that poses questions concerning the parameters and conditions of belief and doubt, order and chaos, and feeling and thought. These inspired works generously propose what might be, while not making insistent assertions of what must be. In these eloquent paintings of expansive, referential beauty and authenticity, Stu Oxley invokes situations of wonder, and offers marvelous portents of the intangible and boundless.

"Works of art are of an infinite solitude, and no means of approach is so useless as criticism. Only love can touch and be fair to them…"

—Rainer Maria Rilke[4]

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[1] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Song of the Sea", *Selected Poems* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1964), p.46.
[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt", *The Merleau Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.69.
[3] Wallace Stevens, "The American Sublime", *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p.114.
[4] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 23.

"It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chief y excites our passions."

—Edmund Burke[1]

Vastness and Obscurity in a Post Sublime Time:

The Art of Stu Oxley

by JOHN KISSICK

If you live long enough in the art world (a dubious distinction to be sure) and self-describe through words like *the post-jaded* and phrases like "I really don't care if I even get it anymore," you will begin to have the necessary critical distance to discern a certain ebb and flow to the so-called "circulation of big ideas" that pulses through our cultural discourse. Let's face it, it isn't exactly news that what goes around, comes around, goes around. In our culture, certain ideas come into favour every so often, only to then be contested, ridiculed and despised by critics, before being once again championed as new or radical and thus deemed useful for further exploration, ridicule, etc.. The conventional spin cycle looks something like this: invention, acceptance, canonization, critique, derision, irrelevance, ironic curiosity, critical homage and… repeat. And though hardly a new phenomenon, even the most post-jaded of us would be hard pressed not to notice that this discursive spin cycle is getting even faster and more efficient as of late. First decade after decade, now season after season, we collectively binge, regurgitate, purge and starve on big words like form (formalism), the spiritual (spiritualism), matter (materialism), history (historicism), expression (expressionism), subjectivity (insert here your own favourite art word). As an artist, part of "being in the game" is trying to

predict where exactly any concept is in its cultural orbit. Waxing towards currency? Or waning into obscurity? And for those with either insight, luck or exquisite timing comes the short-lived reward of cultural *relevancy* and with it a period of critical interest and perhaps even a perception of success.

At the far end of the critical spectrum, there are a few *extra special* words with which an artist can contend if so moved, terms so malleable and slippery, so oozing with complication and yet so deliciously obfuscating to be positively intoxicating to the practitioner. Words like *beauty*. Or even better… *the sublime*. In art talk, the general rule of thumb is that the bigger and more profound the concept, the more inevitable the proliferation of cliché and pastiche that surrounds it. At times, it can seem like the more potential (be it intellectual, emotional, creative, political) a concept has, the more likely it is to be ground down into a tasteless pablum by the critical machinery that surrounds it. And for any serious artist who has committed a life's work to the act of thinking and feeling deeply through a big and complicated and slippery concept, this is a problem. How exactly does an artist explore and create work that is meaningful and sustaining in a cultural environment that privileges perceived novelty or ironic detachment over depth of thinking and critical engagement? And perhaps more problematic and to the point: how do we as viewers even know when this is happening?

Stu Oxley is a serious artist who has spent a considerable amount of his artistic life thinking through and making work about one of those seriously big concepts, which I shall call, for lack of a better term, the sublime. And when I use the word sublime in this context, I am limiting the scope of the word to something the Irishman Edmund Burke would have recognized at the time of his writing the seminal *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* back in 1757 (in part because it

remains one of the clearest and most understandable definitions of this most slippery of words). As a quick refresher, Burke breaks the idea of the sublime into seven distinct aspects, all of which we experience as visible and discernable in the natural world: Darkness, Obscurity, Privation, Vastness, Magnificence, Loudness and Suddenness.[2] To Burke, these specific aspects of our encounter with the natural world provide the *potential* of a singular experience of the awesomeness, terror and majesty that is nature, while simultaneously reminding us of our own relative insignificance. Some of Burke's terms, such as loudness, privation and suddenness, concern the temporal and as a result have been championed by musicians and musicologists (think no further than your typical description of Beethoven's late symphonies). But in the visual arts over the last couple of centuries, it has been the qualities of darkness, obscurity, vastness and magnificence that have captivated artists and audiences alike. Visual art in general and painting specifically are uniquely positioned to channel such qualities, in part because of the iconic, spatial and optic qualities associated with the medium. For example, the perception of illusionistic space is a necessary precondition to vastness, and value and chromatic identity are necessary conditions for the experiencing of darkness—both of which can be met within the context of a single painting. But perhaps more to the point, the sheer material reality of painting, being singular, iconic and atemporal, means that a viewer's perception is concentrated on those very conditions in the act of viewing. There are very good reasons why the term sublime comes up over and over again over the past 250 years of the history of painting… because on the surface, it seems an easy fit! And it makes a lot of mediocre painting just sound more important.

The problem is… that the sublime is, at least in theory, a much more complicated concept than dark canvasses or indistinct, atmospheric spaces. Indeed, in today's art world, your typical run-of-the-mill *Turneresque* fuzzy landscape or *Rothkoesque*

eggplant-meets-forest-green knock-off, are now so derivative and commonplace as to make any reasonably sensitive viewer smirk at the sheer absurdity of it all. Cliché is after all, the opposite—the enemy—of the sublime experience. Now, some jaded souls with hardened hearts may poke fun at the very premise that a painting, any painting, could truly induce a sense of singular awesomeness and terror in a viewer. But for many artists over the course of many generations, the attempt to invoke it seemed, at the very least, an honourable aspiration and thus reason enough to get up in the morning and hit the studio. But the world has changed and, sadly, few buy that rationale anymore. Today, most of what people call "paintings of the sublime" are in truth nothing more than quotations of the mannerisms of previous artists, who were once referred to as possibly pointing towards the sublime! And my friend, that sure as hell isn't the sublime!

Enter Stu Oxley. On the surface, Oxley's work looks and feels like the musings of an experienced artist trying to work his way through the very real problem of making art that can still resonate in a visceral way with even the most jaded of audiences. His arsenal includes everything from large atmospheric canvasses that suggest infinite, indefinable spaces to raw etchings with edgy, scratched lines and plumes of aquatint over greyed out landscapes. His mark making moves back and forth between pictorial association and abstract gesture; his colour is at times airy and fresh, suggesting openness and expanse; at other times rich and humid, obscuring and collapsing around the viewer. The work moves back and forth between sensations of vastness and suffocation. This tangible experience of moving in or out, back or forth, imploding or exploding, f oating or sinking, is something that painting as a medium does well. And in the work of Stu Oxley, this almost visceral negotiation of illusionistic space is always at the forefront of the viewer's experience. The artist accepts his Abstract Expressionist inheritance without reluctance, but the work likewise points back to an earlier painterly tradition, when

things like space and sky and tumult and majesty reigned supreme. Though abstract to the core, Stu Oxley's work nevertheless points—at times directly, at others obtusely—at the English landscape tradition of art history and perhaps even his own early memories. The works are in many ways refreshingly and unabashedly romantic. They are stormy and dark; pastoral and light. But they are also complicated and eccentric. They reside in that in-between space between "the past" and its litany of historical conventions, and the infinite reach of an indefinite space, suspended in the present. In other words, his paintings function a bit like memory.

And what exactly would such sublime memory look like… or at least in material form, as an image? By definition, it would likely need to combine the specific—even the hyper-specific—components of the artist's lived life, with all the complicating and obfuscating clutter that deforms and reforms our experience of the past. Snapshots of places, associations of colour, the ring of a certain name, even the crudest of abstract gestures can, in this world, act as a memory trace of the body. Since memory is messy and painting is singularly adept at being "messy", this stew of experiences would necessarily include both the cinematic and gestural, associative and material components, all colliding into each other like atoms, coalescing into new streams of meaning only to eventually decouple and glom on to something else. Now, most of us experience memory within the confines of a psychological space that is, for the most part, defined by us. My memory is my memory and it sure as hell isn't yours! (Except for when it is… but that is an argument for another time.) It might get reconfigured every day, but for most of us it exists within the temporal space of a lived life. Painting is completely different. It is fundamentally material—fixed, but simultaneously (and somewhat miraculously) capable of giving the distinct impression that it is timeless and limitless. As a result, in the right hands, gooey oil paint smeared on stretched canvas

can give off the impression of being both optically dynamic and completely static. That is why painting, despite its myriad of critics, remains both Awesome and *awesome*. In Stu Oxley's work, the specific elements of a lived life slip effortlessly into a kind of vast painterly obscurity, while never quite letting go of its sources in the artist's mind and body. Here, in this wondrous intermediate space—somewhere between the fixed and the indeterminate, and between the self and the matter—painting collides with memory. The resultant instability reminds us that despite the visual wonder we might feel in the presence of indeterminate space, we are in constant dialogue and ongoing negotiation with the past.

Obscure, vast, terrible, majestic: Stu Oxley's paintings and prints, like the landscapes and spaces to which they inevitably nod, point to the potential of a world left temporarily unmoored in a frothing sea of indeterminacy. Pulled away from the safe harbours of pictorial convention, we find ourselves momentarily afloat in a slightly disorienting spatial expanse and the mind drifts in and out of a very specific vision of world. Both disorienting and compelling, Stu Oxley offers us a momentary glimpse into the possibility of the sublime, through the complicated act of painting. And as things go, perhaps the only version left to us anymore.

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[1] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757

[2] Christine Riding and Nigel Llewellyn, "British Art and the Sublime" in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013, https://tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418

Stu Oxley in conversation with Emily McKibbon

Emily McKibbon: Your first successes as an artist really stem from your printmaking practice. Could you give us a little information on how you came to printmaking?

Stu Oxley: Back in the early 1970s, I went to Sheridan College and met a teacher there named Jo Manning. It wasn't a big printmaking department, but there was a little bit of printmaking going on. She turned me onto printmaking, and I don't know quite what it was—it was something about her personality, not so much the medium itself. She always said things like, "Oh, you know, Stu, you should really enter these print shows." Her encouragement led me to enter *Graphex II* [a juried exhibition in Brantford, 1974]. As a young printmaking student, it was amazing to have been accepted into *Graphex II* and to be hanging in the same place as this artist, Jo Manning. It was my first real introduction to the art world, and I don't know how I ever got into the show, but I did get in and that was the start.

And then, of course, I went to the University of Guelph. I didn't get any advanced standing from my two years at Sheridan, so I went straight into first year and had Walter Bachinski for printmaking. It was an amazing four years with Walter, and he was probably my mentor during the time. He taught me the most important thing about visual arts: that it's the discipline and the passion. He was the embodiment of that: you'd walk into the studio and be immediately aware of his presence, not so much as a teacher, but as a real artist in the studio. Of course, the printmaking studio itself was amazing—I'd never seen anything like it. It was pretty new when I got there. The students were terrific. They

were always there and always working. Always chatting up each other about what they were doing. Printmaking seemed like a family. It was really, really fantastic.

EM: You worked at the University of Guelph for a number of years after graduating. How did your continuing immersion in such a dynamic environment affect your practice?

SO: It was great because I was connected with it every day: being in the print department, teaching students, doing technical things for students and instructors, and seeing instructors come and go. It was really amazing in that respect. But it did become all encompassing. By the time I got home from work and spent the time that was important for me to be with my family, there was very little time for my own studio practice. I tried to sneak it into my daily work, at lunch and when there were no classes, but they caught me, eventually, and said, "No, you can't do that." But working at U of G was all good, and it kept me aware of what was going on.

EM: Moving from your position as studio assistant at Guelph to opening your own studio must have been challenging. Could you tell us about the origins of Riverside?

SO: I quit the university: after nine years it was time. I was going to stay home and look after the kids while my wife Marion taught high school. I was going to pretend that I was an artist. I put up drawing paper in the kitchen because at that point, I didn't have a studio.

I did that for a while, and then I went to a friend's wedding. Tony Scherman and Margaret Priest were sitting at the opposite side of the table. Tony asked, "What else are you going to do?" I answered, "I don't know, I'll take care of the kids, live a life, expire." He said, "Why don't you open a print studio? You open the print studio and I'll bring you three clients this year. Those three clients will bring you other clients, and so on."

Within a month I had the press, and I opened in a little studio on the river in Elora, on Mill Street, consequently named Riverside Studio. I thought, this is where

I'm going to be forever, but it didn't work out; the rent was okay but the space was small and noisy. So I decided to build a studio, and a month later my brother and I built one and I kept the name. Tony came, and Margaret came, and Brian Boigon came, and other people, Joe Fafard… it just started to snowball. It was pretty amazing. Busy, but amazing.

EM: You must find yourself constantly challenged by working with different artists, with different intentions and aesthetics. What role do you think Riverside Studio has played in the evolution of your own artistic practice?

SO: That's a huge, huge question. On many levels, it's really affected the way I think about my work and how I approach the work.

Take Tony Scherman, for example. He would phone me a couple of days before and say, get twelve plates, I'm coming. You could hear him think visually in the studio. I would stand back, and watch this going on and think that this is how it really is. Watching him work on twelve plates at a time with such certainty and so dynamically. Wow. Then I'd work with Margaret Priest. I was invited to her studio to see the drawings for some new prints and her studio was a white room. On her table was a little drawing, a piece of paper about six by six, with a dozen grades of graphite pencils beside it. She told me she's been working on this one drawing for a long time. I compare that to Tony's work, all over the place and gestural, and Margaret's work is really tight. She taught me the logical part of printmaking, the exactness of printmaking, whereas before I was kind of sloppy. And then all of a sudden I had to be very tight. In a quiet way, she pulled my practice together.

Tim Zuck came to my studio with a drawing and we had it scanned and we did a photo etching of it. Then we spent a whole day deciding what colour to use, just looking at two proofs, and he'd wander off, and come back and look again. The colour issue was just minimal to me at the time, it wasn't a big deal. But for him, it was really specific and necessary. Tim also introduced me to Paul Kuhn Gallery [Calgary]. He arranged

a show with Eric Fischl, April Gornik, Tony Scherman and a few other big names—I was the new bee with all these artists. There's that aspect of it as well, where the associations bring you other things. It all sort of works, magically. When I started Riverside Studio, I didn't know it was going to work that way.

EM: You've taught at various institutions, including the University of Guelph, the University of Waterloo and Georgian College. How do you balance your different roles of artist, collaborator and teacher?

SO: I collaborate with different artists as a printer technician. And I think teaching is collaboration because I don't really think you can teach art to students. When I'm with an artist, printing, I pull back and just wait. If I see someone is uncomfortable I move in a bit. But I always leave a wall there, because I'm just a facilitator. I see teaching in the same way. I'm not their teacher, I'm just a go-between between what they think is art and what they feel is art.

But it's very similar to making art. I collaborate with myself on a day-to-day basis. I just facilitate something that's happening on the canvas. It's like collaboration with my instinct. If I find I'm working away, or if I find a student is dogmatic or academic, I try to break, immediately. It's not reaching anywhere. If it becomes too easy or the answer comes, then I erase it. Because I want the question, I don't want the answer. I don't even want a concept.

EM: The first exhibition featuring the impressive output of Riverside Studio artists was in 1995. It was organized by the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery and curated by Anne McPherson and toured to a number of different venues. Today, you're co-curating a second studio retrospective. Are there any watershed moments revealing themselves in hindsight?

SO: There are some really important moments in terms of my practice. One day in my studio, Stephen Hutchings saw some tubes of oil paint on a side table, and a little board that I was working on, trying to learn how to paint. I never learned how to paint, had never painted before,

not even in university. Stephen asked me what I was doing with these tiny tubes of red, yellow, blue, black and white, and this little board. He asked me, "How can you be a painter with that?" The print shop was all print shop, everything was laid out perfectly, and he just started moving furniture away from the back half of the room. We moved furniture outside and down into the basement, and all of a sudden there was only a press, a couple of tables and a big open space. He told me to go buy $1000 worth of paint, and $1000 worth of stretchers, and then I could start thinking about being a painter. At that point, I committed. I couldn't say no because it was there. It was a challenge.

Anne McPherson was a huge support when I was working outside of the system. In fact, she has been a constant support for me and my art for more than 30 years. That first show of Riverside Studio was really important.

John Kissick is a good friend of Neil Shawcross, while we're talking about communities and watershed moments. They exchanged teaching positions between Ulster University and Penn State for a number of years, six months at a time. They got to know each other quite well, and Neil started to know America, and he loves America. So every year he comes over, and every year he comes to my studio to do prints, thanks to John. After about six years of printing with me, he's at the studio and he's working away on some big plates. I'm over in the other corner complaining about everything, and he's very quiet. Then there's a pause and he looks at me, puts his paintbrush down and says, "You know Stu, aren't we the luckiest? We get to go to our studio every day and play—and people think it's important." That, to me, was a life-changing moment I'll never forget.

EM: I wanted to move from talking about Riverside Studio to speak a bit more about your own practice. I see a continual emphasis on drawing and mark-making in your prints. Even in some of your most recent prints, your hand is visible at work on the plate. What role does drawing play in your practice?

SO: Drawing, for me, is an expression of a moment.

In my second year of university I was walking down Dundas in front of the AGO and I saw *Large Two Forms*, the Henry Moore sculpture, for the first time. I stood across the street and looked at that sculpture for a long time. It wasn't just the shape of the sculpture itself, it was the space inside and outside of the sculpture that vibrated for me so immensely. In my studio I'll make a mark, and the relationship between one mark and another mark is important, and that's not specific to the marks themselves, but it's the relationship that I arrive at between the marks. When I approach the canvas or the plate, I'm very ambivalent. In that moment, I've got this beautiful, shiny plate or big, white canvas and I make this mark, and that is drawing. Or I go to the plate and scratch something into the plate and it's movement, it's not going to be final, just a movement into the space. Drawing allows me to react to the space.

With the prints there's a remove because it goes through all sorts of processes. It's perfect, for me, I'm out of control and I don't have anything to do with it, there are just marks that I've made that I have to react to. And if that reaction gives me answers, I immediately get rid of it. The paintings for the show went through a similar process. There were two months I couldn't touch the paintings because the first statement was so powerful gesturally that I thought they were done. But I was being tricked. The answers from the painting were too obvious. And I liked the answers, but there were no questions.

EM: You choose to present your works as monoprints rather than editioned works. In doing so, your prints are more allied to paintings or drawings in that there's an "original." What appeals to you about the monoprint?

SO: For my own work, it's difficult to bring myself to do editions. It's just so ... tedious.

The monoprint allows bigger freedom. Instead of having one plate, and spending fifty hours on it and then fifty more hours printing it, I can have fifteen, thirty chine collés all over the studio, playing. At

one point, I needed to develop imagery as quickly as possible because I was feeling like I was getting older. I needed more time and chine collé allows me to do that. I take this piece of Japanese paper, treat it irreverently, and then treat it reverently as a print. I can crumple it up, transfer stuff to it, it's great. That's how I started doing diptychs, because two or three papers would be beside each other and look fantastic. I do continue to do editions, but that's probably out of guilt. As a printer, I still have to be able to print. Painting is also on that edge, and I paint while still making prints. The approach I use for monoprints and painting works well at the same time.

EM: In 1998, we presented a solo exhibition of your work: *Echoes*. Many of the prints in that show were monochromatic in rich tonal blacks, greys and whites or vivid red. Colour plays such an important role in your current work. Can you speak to how your use of colour has evolved since *Echoes*?

SO: For half of my artistic life I worked in black and white, that's it: either charcoal or ink. I got to the point where I could see black and white and all its tonality as colour. I wasn't dismissing colour, just doing colour in black and white, so when red approached me it felt so close to black as a colour. Even when you take a photo etching, red acts like black in terms of blocking light. It has that same sort of value, in many respects, for me.

When I started painting, red worked great because it's close to the way I was thinking about black. And then, of course, I didn't want to do fifteen red paintings, so I used yellow and blue. And then, one day, Will Gorlitz told me he's doing a talk at the Elora Arts Centre. He jokes, "I'm doing it because you never, ever consider speaking in a public forum." Okay, that's how it goes, "But," Will, still joking, said, "I'm talking about your work, not mine. It'll be really short: red, yellow and blue." I felt like he nailed, dead on, my inadequacies with mixing colour. So, from that point on, whenever I picked up red or whenever I picked up yellow, or picked up blue, his comments echoed in my mind. I thank Will for that: because it's still red, yellow and blue, but it's a different manner of dealing with them.

EM: In the early 2000s, you began experimenting with painting. Could you speak a little bit about that transition?

SO: At one point printmaking became easy. The biggest reason for painting was this easiness. There was nothing to it, I could just do the prints and they were beautiful and they worked, but there was really no tension in the process anymore. Painting added a tension.

Painting was a struggle, probably the hardest thing I'd ever done. Printmaking was easy because it was magic: it was like developing a photograph in the darkroom. Painting was unforgiving, but after a while it took over.

I really think that letting go, letting things happen, is important. When I meditate, for example, some days are good and some days are not so great, and what comes is not necessarily what I think I'm going to get. I sometimes wonder if painting is like that—like meditation. It's why I called the last show *Meditations* [Mira Godard Gallery, 2015], because the process is similar.

EM: Dawn Owen, in her essay for *North Shore Reflections*, talked about the symbiosis and tension between painting and prints. You're doing something different in two different media, and you're attuned to what's specific about each.

SO: When I go to the studio I look at the paintings, but when there's something in the painting that is stuck or frozen, I'll immediately go and do the prints because I know I can do them. It's different, but the prints inform the painting, showing a direction, the colour, or maybe just pointing out that I shouldn't be uptight about it. It tells me to be a little less apprehensive and just put the next layer on.

EM: So in that sense, it sounds like you're working through some of your ideas in printmaking, and also regaining some confidence.

SO: It goes back and forth all the time. Painting is getting easier, but printmaking is always the easiest thing. Because I'm removed from the final print, I can't worry about it.

EM: Your work consistently seems to give tangible form to the intangible. What kind of space are you creating for a viewer? What are you hoping people will take away from the experience of viewing your work?

SO: It goes back to answered questions. I want viewers to feel the big questions, which might sound ridiculous looking at my paintings which are sort of quiet. But I really think, because there's not enough there, that the questions can come forward. Questions like: Who am I? What am I feeling at this moment? Does this give me pleasure or pain? Is this going to change me? Or, maybe, when I walk down the sidewalk I can stop and look at the cracks instead of my destination. These spaces are non-descriptive, a bit out there, void-like, mystical, but still allow some entry. I want people to walk away feeling a sense of order, utopia, whatever you want to call it.

When I start the painting, there's hope. An artist once said to me, "I used to have a lot of faith, but I have very little anymore." And I thought "How can you be an abstract painter and not have faith?" To approach that white canvas, you have to have faith that something is going to happen. You hope for some sort of order. For me it's a sense of knowing the unknowing, faith.

I hope that viewers don't come in and feel like it's a church. But I hope they walk in and have good vibrations. We should play the Beach Boys.


Stu Oxley
Distant Grounds


EXIT


Stu Otley

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Stu Oxley in his studio.
Image courtesy of the artist

STU OXLEY was born in Ramsbottom, England, in 1950. He received his BFA at the University of Guelph in 1978 and attained his MFA at the University of Waterloo in 1995. Oxley has exhibited his work in over twenty-five solo exhibitions, including recent exhibitions at Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto; Naughton Gallery, Belfast, Ireland; and Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary. Oxley's work is held in numerous private and public art collections including the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Museum London, MacLaren Art Centre, Nickle Museum of Art, Calgary, and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. He is represented by Paul Kuhn Gallery (Calgary), Mira Godard Gallery (Toronto) and Jennifer Kostuik Gallery (Vancouver). In addition to his personal practice, Oxley has worked as a Master Printer for many significant Canadian and international artists at Riverside Studio, a printmaking facility he has owned and operated since 1989. Oxley resides in Elora, Ontario, and teaches drawing and printmaking at Georgian College in Barrie.

RON SHUEBROOK is an artist, writer, and educator whose work has been collected by more than sixty public galleries and corporations including the National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario, Art Gallery of Guelph, MacLaren Art Centre, and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS. He is represented by the Olga Korper Gallery,Toronto, ON, Renann Isaacs Contemporary Art, Guelph, ON, and Studio 21 Fine Art, Halifax. He has contributed essays to catalogues for public and commercial galleries as well as articles and reviews to Canadian and international publications.

He is the former President, Vice President, Academic, and Professor of OCAD University where he is now a Professor Emeritus. OCAD awarded an Honourary Doctorate to him in 2005. He has also held such other positions as Professor and Chair of the Department of Fine Art, and founding Coordinator of the MFA Program, University of Guelph, Assistant Professor, Acadia University, and Associate Professor and Chair of the Studio Division, NSCAD University. In 2006, he received the Art Administrator's *Award of Distinction*, National Council of Art Administrators, USA, and a Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012. He is a former President of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, past President of the Universities Art Association of Canada, and former Chair, Visual Arts Nova Scotia. His solo exhibition, *Ron Shuebrook: Drawings*, toured public galleries across Canada from 2013-2015. He is currently Senior Artist in Residence at the Boarding House Centre for the Arts, Guelph, Ontario.

JOHN KISSICK is an artist and writer.

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